



CHINA-EUROPA FORUM

Common challenges pave the way for continued dialogue between Europe and China

During the second edition of the China-Europa Forum held in October 2007, Chinese and European participants in 46 socio-professional and theme-based workshops exchanged their insights and opinions regarding the future outlook and challenges faced by their respective societies. A thorough analysis by all participants of the information collected during the workshops reveals these challenges are similar despite contextual, cultural and historical differences.

14 and 15 February 2008

During the second edition of the China-Europa Forum, in workshops held in 23 cities across nine countries of the European Union, and in plenary sessions held in Brussels, 1000 participants (350 Chinese and 650 Europeans) – from different parts of the world and with different socio-professional backgrounds – met in 46 workshops held simultaneously over two days to exchange insights. 19 of these workshops were attended by individuals working in the same career field, while each of the other 27 focused on a particular theme. Thanks to the organisation and work methods of the workshops, and the restricted number (and diversity) of attendants in each one, the exchanges between the two societies was truly unique.

Each workshop was comprised of four half-day sessions: 1) Chinese perspectives and European questions for the Chinese participants; 2) European perspectives and Chinese questions for the European participants ; 3) Convergence and Divergence and 4) Outlook for further collective reflection.

At the end of each workshop, participants were asked to submit a group summary. Each summary was a series of short sentences that either drew conclusions on, reflected upon, or asked questions about the different themes that were discussed. Following the same structure for each summary was necessary to examine with clarity and rigour the principle conclusions drawn from extraordinarily rich and diverse exchanges.

Immediately following the plenary sessions on October 6 and 7, conceptual mapping techniques developed jointly by the Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le progrès de l'Homme and Exemole made it possible to provide participants with a very rough summary of the meetings. This work was done at night in a solitary fashion however, after the workshops and before the plenary sessions. The question arose as to whether results were perhaps too subjective and overly influenced by the preconceptions of the person who wrote the summary.

To avoid this problem, we invited forty people (30 Europeans and 10 Chinese) to work together on the project in Paris on February 14-15 2008. Most had participated in one of the Forum's workshops, but not everyone. Furthermore, in the interest of the project no one was allowed to work on the summary of a workshop they had attended.

The group worked according to strict guidelines, focusing primarily on the first two sessions – Chinese perspectives and European perspectives. The summary was drafted in a two-stage process. First, and for each session, nine teams of 4 or 5 people were asked to summarize the 5 main ideas to come out of a group of workshops. By the end of day one we had 45 (9x5) summarised themes for each of the two sessions. On day two, participants were divided into two groups. Group one worked on summarising Chinese perspectives and group two worked on summarising European perspectives. They were asked to organise the 45 themes into seven main categories that would form the main, overall summary. It may be added that on both days, groups were divided to ensure that participants knew each other very little or not at all.

The outcome described below is remarkable for three reasons: 1) at each stage of the project, groups worked in complete harmony and were able to reach a consensus; 2) the summarised themes regarding China and Europe are remarkably similar, even in the way they are written – at first glance this is very surprising given the differences in context, and 3) the summarised themes are nearly identical, even in the way they are written, to the ones identified spontaneously in the rough summary made on October 6.

Two important observations can be made based on these results.

Firstly, using a rigorous work method not only to define the themes, the structure of the workshops and how they will be run, but also to develop the final group summary allowed participants to make very useful observations based on this extensive group effort.

Secondly, important societal issues find their way into the debate of their own accord if we have the patience and desire to examine a given society from all angles.

A third observation could be made – for Europeans working under the eye of the Chinese, and the Chinese working under the eye of the Europeans, it was important to be clear and concise in order to transmit essential ideas to one another. Thanks to this clarity and concision, the essential components of a society were able to emerge. The forum brings an alternative approach to the extensive and relatively solitary analysis efforts of certain specialists – namely, the identification of pivotal societal issues through a collective review of a society from all angles.

This extensive analytical and cataloguing work gives rise to four major questions, which will probably not come as a surprise to those familiar with these two societies. The goal of a project like this is not to shock but to establish a dialogue between different societies based on the certainty and on evidence that despite their differences, these societies face startlingly similar challenges. Dialogue can shed light on and examine these challenges from a wide variety of angles.

Theme 1:

China and Europe should work together to develop a new model for development.

At different times and very different paces, China and Europe have been lead to adopt development and growth strategies driven strongly by the market economy and integration in global markets. Both societies have been transformed by these trends, and are witness to mass migration to urban areas, social inequalities, serious environmental damage, population aging, the development of internal or externally-driven migration, the breakdown of the traditional family and the decline of older forms of social cohesion and control. In both cases, new development models must be

invented – what in China is referred to as a harmonious society and in Europe more commonly known as sustainable development. How can we achieve this when the shadow cast by economic considerations seemingly remains so long?

Theme 2:

How can each society defend its beliefs and remain true to its identity, using this identity as a force for the future and a basis for a renewed ethics in a context of globalisation and multicultural exchanges? How does one stay true to oneself while being open to changing global trends?

Theme 3:

China and Europe are members of an interdependent and globalised world. How can we strengthen dialogue between these two societies? How can we reduce incomprehension, misunderstanding and mutual concerns? How can we achieve integration while preserving identity? How can we build cooperation between societies within a renewed model of global governance? To what ends and by what means?

Theme 4:

Older governance models, hierarchically structured and compartmentalised, are no longer adapted to either the nature of current problems (which call for cooperation among those involved) or the desire of societies for increased participation, responsibilities and a greater role in decision making. How can we invent a method of governance that is adapted to the needs and aspirations of the 21st century?